

JOHN FOXE’S “OLDCASTLE CONTROVERSY”: *ACTS AND MONUMENTS**

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I

The aim of this paper is to analyze John Foxe’s representations of Sir John Oldcastle, also called Lord Cobham, in *Acts and Monuments*. It is well known that this martyrology was exploited as a source material in both Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Historical plays especially which drew on the martyrs’ faith, lives and executions are referred to as Foxean plays. They are: *1 Sir John Oldcastle* (1599), *Thomas Cromwell* (1600), *Sir Thomas Wyatt* (1602), *When You See Me, You Know Not Me* (1605) and *1 and 2 If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (1605, 1606).¹ Compared to the historical dramas of the 1590s including those of Shakespeare, these plays have drawn little attention from the critics. It is Judith Doolin Spikes who first fully reconsidered these plays in the light of Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*. We tend to regard only Shakespeare’s historical plays as representations of the constitutional history of England, but Spikes pays heed to what happened during the upheaval of religious independence when Church of England separated from the Catholic Church. She insists that these plays dramatize how the religious identity of England was established, borrowing from episodes in *Acts and Monuments*.

Spikes’ focal point in understanding *Acts and Monuments* lies in the Elect Nation myth. According to her, Foxe depicts Marian martyrs as God’s chosen people, England as the Elect Nation, and Queen Elizabeth as the symbol of deliverance. With the arrival of King James I from Scotland as the successor to Queen Elizabeth, Spikes points out that England was once again confronted with the weighty issue of deciding on what was the true religion chosen by God, either Catholicism

or Protestantism. This was described by Foxe in *Acts and Monuments*. Indeed, Spikes' discussion of each play is somewhat persuasive as she does provide us with a new interpretation of *Acts and Monuments* and a fresh reading of the plays. However, it seems that her reading of *Acts and Monuments* is narrow and fails to allude to other signs Foxe had described in the book.² For example, she introduces *Sir John Oldcastle* and *Thomas Cromwell* as follows:

These, the earliest of the history plays drawn directly from Foxe's pages, embody the essential elements of the myth of the Elect Nation which were to be fully developed in the Jacobean historical drama. Each has a central character modeled on Foxe's interpretation of a historical personage occupying a pivotal position in the Elect Nation scheme of history. (123)

As Spikes points out, it is necessary to reconsider these plays in the light of the myth of the Elect Nation, and the latter is related to Foxe's understanding of the historical Oldcastle and Cromwell. However, she does not mention the way in which Foxe associates these historical figures with the Elect Nation myth. In addition, although she declares that all the Foxean plays represent Foxe's view of the Elect Nation, each play approaches to Foxe's martyrology from a different angle, without ever centering on the Elect Nation myth.

In this paper, I will dwell on the Oldcastle episode in *Acts and Monuments* and explore how Foxe demonstrates this legendary Lollard hero. As a result, this exploration will help us understand the great influence of the martyrology on the Elizabethan and Jacobean historical dramas, which were so highly regarded by Spikes.

II

In objection to Nicholas Harpsfield, Foxe writes the following:

And if ye think it much, that I would exemplify these whom ye

call traitors in the Book of Martyrs; first, ye must understand, that I wrote no such book bearing the title of the "Book of Martyrs:" I wrote a book called the "Acts and Monuments of things passed in the Church," &c. wherein many other matters be contained beside the martyrs of Christ. (392)

Foxe does not intend to compile a mere martyrology, but rather his focus lies in writing "acts" and "monuments", that is, the deeds of martyrs and their written testimonials of faith before death. In other words, unlike traditional martyrologies, his purpose in writing this book was to record the martyrs' true deeds and words on the point of death as documents so that people can honor saintly sacrifice.

Foxe's purpose in recording the true acts and monuments of saints as a historical document was backed not only by his printer John Day and his patron William Cecil but also by the fervent Protestant movement. According to John N. King, under the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, the Protestants supported iconoclasm and the need to reject purgatory and therefore denied older rituals and manners of commemorating the saints. Rather, a donation of books and libraries, a tradition which had been continued long after the Edwardian Reformation, was regarded as a more pious way to remember donors and replaced an older style of commemoration. A gift of *Acts and Monuments* followed this practice and functioned as a new way of memory. (King 5-6) The martyrology was donated to parish libraries and other public places including churches, cathedrals, schools, parish libraries and guildhalls in memory of those who had died. Placed alongside the Bible on the shelves, the copies were accessible to commoners.³ As a result, along with the English Bible and Book of Common Prayer, *Acts and Monuments* had a great impact on people's religious consciousness in the early modern England.

Acts and Monuments was published in five editions from 1563 to 1596⁴ with some abridgements.⁵ It is said that Foxe wrote this book after he saw the persecution and execution of the Protestants under the reign of Queen Mary, but he had already written martyrology before *Acts and Monuments*, *Commentarii in ecclesia gestarum rerum* (1554).

According to Evenden and Freeman, Foxe was greatly influenced by John Bale in his youth, and in writing *Commentarii*, he seemed to keep Bale's writings in his mind, and indeed, gained fundamental information about Wycliffe and the Lollards from Bale.⁶ However, more than the impact of Bale, Foxe's own intensive and vast research is reflected in this martyrology.

Commentarii had a great influence on contemporary martyrologies, and some owed their information about Lollard martyrs to *Commentarii*. For example, the Dutch minister Adriaan van Haemstede's *History of the Pious Martyrs* (1559) borrowed a description of martyrs in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from Foxe as well as his reference to the Lollards which was also indebted to *Commentarii*. (Evenden and Freeman 56-58) Elsewhere, Ludwig Rabus also used Foxe's description of the Lollards in his eight volume martyrology. Rabus' first volume was published in 1552, and the remaining seven volumes were from 1554-1558. In particular, the accounts of the pre-Lutheran martyrs such as William Thorpe, John Oldcastle and William Tylor in the third volume are taken from Foxe's. (Evenden and Freeman 58-60) These martyrologies reveal that *Commentarii* had a wide readership on the continent, and the Lollards came to be understood among the European Protestants.

One of Foxe's most important Lollard heroes was Sir John Oldcastle. Before discussing Foxe's description of Oldcastle, let us briefly look at this historical figure. Sir John Oldcastle served King Henry IV and gained a military reputation during the king's expedition to Scotland. Under the command of Prince Henry, he also fought against Glendower. However, those militaristic achievements were not what made him famous. Despite the fact that he had been in charge of royal service, he had heterodox views. For example, he aided heretical preachers and had an association with the Hussites in Bohemia and sent Wycliffe's writings to Prague. It is uncertain when he began to feel sympathy for the Lollards, but at the beginning of the reign of King Henry V, he was already a legendary Lollard hero.

The representation of Oldcastle has been troublesome because his life and death has been differently interpreted during the course of the

Reformation in England. While he was described as a traitor to the state in the hostile Catholic tradition of the fifteenth century, he was a faithful martyr from the Protestant viewpoint of the sixteenth century. Both chroniclers and martyrologists had made their own religious and political positions clear in how they had depicted Oldcastle. Foxe was also among them. As is often pointed out, *Acts and Monuments* lay within the Protestants' publishing network. Not only Foxe but also his printer, John Day, and as well as a patron, William Cecil, strongly supported Protestantism, and this martyrology does not consider Oldcastle as a traitor to the king. Therefore, how did Foxe portray this Lollard hero as unrelated to the rebellion against the king in 1414? Let us explore Foxe's representation of Oldcastle in *Acts and Monuments*.

III

Oldcastle's involvement in the rebellion of 1414 had been recorded in the chronicles by such historians as Robert Fabian, Edward Hall, Thomas Cooper, and Richard Grafton. The majority regarded Oldcastle as a traitor to the king and England. On the other hand, Foxe attempted to deny his involvement in the violence. In his argument, Oldcastle was "a man so well instructed in the knowledge of God's word" (362)⁷ and "so faithful and obedient to God". (350) In addition, he was "a poor knight by his degree, having none of all the peers and nobles in the world to join him". (362) It is in the number of the soldiers who were levied by Oldcastle that Foxe repeatedly poses the question as to the knight's involvement, doubting whether twenty thousand soldiers were actually gathered for the rebellion. (362, 370)

As mentioned above, Foxe's goal lay in the recording of martyrs' true actions and words at the point of death, and in order to prove Oldcastle's innocence with the regards to the conspiracy, he first criticizes the inaccurate descriptions by older chroniclers. For example, Foxe denounces Polydore Virgil's "partial and untrue handling" (375) of the history. According to Foxe's judgement, Virgil made mistakes in the chronological order. Hence, the latter's insistence on Oldcastle's

involvement in the conspiracy was too doubtful to believe. (375-376) Foxe's strategy was to avoid arguing about what really happened in the 1414 rebellion. Rather, he posed questions concerning earlier historians' awareness of historiography by revealing contradictions in their chronicles and attempted to bring about a revision of their presentations of Oldcastle's life and death. For Foxe Hall is a good model for other chroniclers to follow.

In Hall's chronicle, like other chronicles, Oldcastle's episode is placed at the beginning of the reign of Henry V. He succinctly explains what happened in 1414: Oldcastle was accused of a heresy by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel; Oldcastle confessed his faith to the king; he was accused of being a heretic by the prelates; he was sent to the Tower of London. (48)⁸ In Hall's description, there is no hostility towards Oldcastle, just as there is no mention of Oldcastle's involvement in the rebellion. If Foxe's explanation is right, Hall's silence about the rebellion is believed to have come about because of a revision as explained below when Foxe reports on Hall's chronicle and a modification. Inserting an important episode into his explanation of Hall's chronicle, Foxe reports Hall's revision as follows:

It so befell, that as Hall was entering into the story of sir John Oldcastle, and of sir Roger Acton and their fellows, the book of John Bale, touching the story of the lord Cobham, was at the same time newly come over: which book was privily conveyed by one of his servants into the study of Hall, so that in turning over his books it must needs come to his hands. At the sight whereof, when he saw the ground and reasons in that book contained, he turned to the authors in the aforesaid book alleged; whereupon, within two nights after, moved by what cause, I know not, but so it was, that he, taking his pen, rased and cancelled all that he had written before against sir John Oldcastle and his fellows, and which was now ready to do print, containing near to the quality of three pages. (377-378)

As explained above, John Bale's writings had a great impact on Foxe in

writing *Commentarii and Acts and Monuments*. If we believe Foxe's reference, Hall might have Bale's *Brief Chronicle* in 1544,⁹ and like Foxe he was also influenced by Bale's accounts of Oldcastle. Foxe reveals what Hall wrote before deletion:

And lest Master Cope, you, or any other should think me to speak beside my book, be it therefore known both to you, and to all others, by these presents, that the very selfsame first copy of Hall, rased and crossed with his own pen, remaineth in my hands to be shown and seen, as need shall require. The matter which he cancelled out, came to this effect. Wherein he, following the narration of Polydore, began with like words to declare how the sacramentaries here in England, after the death of John Huss, and Jerome of Prague, being pricked as he saith, with a demoniacal sting, first conspired against the priests, and afterwards against the king, having for their captains sir John Oldcastle the lord Cobahm, and sir Roger Acton, knight; with many more words to the like purpose and effect, as Polydore, and other such like chroniclers do write against him. (378)

Focusing on the descriptions of biased chroniclers, Foxe indicates that they were blind to the truth. He exhorts those chroniclers, such as Hall, to reconsider Oldcastle's involvement in the sedition by reading Bale's and his martyrologies. Thus, Foxe frees Oldcastle from the conspiracy through his insistence on chroniclers' biased views of this Lollard hero.

IV

Moreover, Foxe refers to the preface to the statute which was conceived against the Lollards. He argues that people who judge Oldcastle and Roger Acton as traitors to the king are likely to believe the preface attached before the statute. The preface usually shows why this statute was written. While the statute presents public civil policy, the preface is private and depends on particular facts. Moreover, the

preface has no necessary probation. (355) Foxe duly criticizes this point, indicating that the proem of the statute begins with “rumours”, and rumours make congregations and then insurrections. (358) Then, he continues ironically:

whereas in all these rumours, congregations and insurrections, yet never a blow was given, never a stroke was stricken, no blood spilled, no furniture nor instruments of war, no sign of battle, yea no express signification either of any rebellious word, or malicious fact, described either in records, or yet in any chronicle (358)

Neither the inaccurate memories and records in the chronicles can prove Oldcastle as a traitor, nor do rumours and congregations prove the Lollards’ seditious violence. Nevertheless, the Parliament passed a statute to root them out. To attack on the proem, Foxe stresses the importance of probation:

the records must be sought, the registers must be turned over, letters also and ancient instruments ought to be perused, and authors with the same compared (377)

Both Oldcastle’s guilt in the conspiracy and the Lollards’ violence should be proved through firm documentation.

Foxe’s persistence in searching out records and writings seems to be linked to a larger scheme. Referring to the twenty thousand Lollards, he attempts to reconsider why so many people gathered in Beverly. The primary question raised by Foxe was whether what happened there was a real rebellion under the leadership of Oldcastle and his follows or whether people simply came together for a mere religious meeting.

Where they came in number of twenty thousand against the king? in what order of battle-array they marched? ... whether they were horsemen or footmen? If they were horsemen, as is pretended, what meant they then to resort to the thickets near to St. Giles’s

field, which was no meet place for horses to stir? ... Moverover, it is to be demanded, what ensigns or flags, what shot, what powder, what armour, weapons, and other furniture of war? ... *And peradventure, if truth were well sought, it would be found at length, that instead of armies and weapons, they were coming only with their books, and with Beverly their preacher, into those thickets.* (italics mine 359)

This comment stems only from his imagination. His reference to the book, however, seems to deny the violence of the Lollards which the Catholic Church and the government insisted upon. The battle of the Lollards, if in truth, it happened at all, would be not an armed but a more peaceful disagreement. Since the anti-Lollard "bloody" statute of 1401, the sentence of burning heretics was introduced to England for the first time by *De heretic comburendo*, and was adopted under the reign of King Henry IV. The Lollards had suffered greatly from this fearful punishment and hatred. His son, Henry V, succeeded the statute. The onus was on Henry V to prove his own legitimacy because his father usurped the previous king, Richard II. It was only through the victory of the wars against foreign countries that he made himself the legitimate king of England. It is uncertain whether the warlike king might have found pacifism in the Lollards, but Foxe's bookish Lollards are contrasted with the armed king.

The Lollards' dependence on writings is also shown in Oldcastle's resistance to the Catholic Church. In being confronted with the fury of the anti-Christ, he "took paper and pen in hand, and so wrote a Christian confession or reckoning of his faith ..., both singing and sealing it with his own hand" (324). He wanted Henry V to read this confession, but the king refused to do it and sent him to the prelates for the trial. (325) Foxe's explanation presents Oldcastle's literacy as an important tool in his self-defense tool just as soldiers used the military weapons on the battlefield. However, he failed and was sent to the Tower of London. This persistence in books and writings is succeeded by a later historian, Holinshed. After Oldcastle's narrowly escape, pursuers found some books where he had stayed:

In the same place were found books written in English, and some of those books in times past had been trimly gilt, limned, and beautified with images, the heads whereof had been scraped off, and in the Litany they had blotted forth the name of Our Lady and of other saints, till they came to the verse *Pace nobis Domine*. Diverse writings were found there also, in derogation of such honour as then was thought due Our Lady. (92)¹⁰

Although Holinshed does not clearly relate Oldcastle's involvement in the conspiracy, his references to the books and writings show the Lollards' principle for resistance like Foxe and Bale.

The word "martyre" means to witness in Greek. Foxe's purpose in *Acts and Monuments* seems to present this original meaning of the word. For him, martyres are saints who had witnessed the true faith, and Oldcastle is among them. Thus, his purpose seems to be to convey those martyrs' acts and words accurately for this martyrology.

In conclusion, it is in those acts and words that Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights find meaning in this martyrology. Of course, as Spikes indicates, we can see some of the myth of the Elect Nation in the deeds and words of the saints immediately before execution. However, it would seem that the playwrights' attention was focused more on the martyrs' humanism and characters than specific religious thought. For example, Oldcastle's relationship with books and writings, which both Foxe and Holinshed referred to, is represented in *1 Sir John Oldcastle* (1599). It would certainly be important to analyze the meaning of that relationship. In a forthcoming paper, I will discuss the representation of Oldcastle in this play and will further consider the influence of *Acts and Monuments* on the plays.

Notes

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¹ Critics categorized the plays differently. See O'Connell 113; Helgerson 253; Robinson xiii.

² Robinson points out that Spikes' reading of these plays as the Elect Nation plays depends on William Haller's inaccurate reading of *Acts and Monuments*. William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs,'* Harper and Row, 1963. See Robinson xxii.

³ In many cases, *Acts and Monument* was chained with the Bible and put on the shelf. See King 5-7.

⁴ The four editions were published from 1563-1583 during which both John Foxe and John Day were alive.

⁵ According to David Scott Kastan, they are Timothy Bright's Abridgement (1589), Clement Cotton's Abridgement (1613), Thomas Mason, *Christs Victorie Over Sathans Tyrannie* (1615), and John Taylor, *The Book of Martyrs* (1616). See Kastan "Little Foxes."

⁶ In writing *Commentarii*, Foxe consulted with John Bale's manuscript of *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, which depicted in detail Wycliffe and the Lollards. See Evenden and Freeman 37-44.

⁷ All the references to *Acts and Monuments* are taken from *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*. Vol. III., rev. George Townsend (1563; AMS Press Inc., 1965).

⁸ All the references to Hall's chronicle are taken from *The Union of the Two Noble & Illustre Families of Lancastre & York*. ed. Henry Ellis (1548; repr. London, 1809; New York, 1965).

⁹ Annabel Patterson points out that Hall might have used the posthumous edition of 1548. See Patterson 144.

¹⁰ The reference to *Holinshed's Chronicles* is taken from *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. Vol. III. (AMS Press Inc., 1976).

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